Literacy UKLA

Literacy Volume 57 Number 2 May 2023

Critical literacy: an approach to child rights education in Uganda and Canada

Shelley Jones and Kathleen Manion

Abstract

For children to know how to fully participate in and most effectively lead the world they will inherit, they must learn how to critically engage with it and be knowledgeable about foundational rights and instruments that support such engagement. Together, critical literacy, which encourages the examination and interrogation of the underlying assumptions of dominant narratives and 'legitimate' knowledge, and children's rights education, which involves children in learning how to express their ideas and fully participate in society (as appropriate to their age and ability), offer a powerful approach—theoretical and pedagogical—to engage children in active engagement of the world, especially with respect to the promotion of social justice. However, the layers of complexity and risks associated with deep consideration of challenging topics require expert guidance and compassionate role modelling from teachers of young children. Our paper considers the intersections between critical literacy and global child rights with reference to a study conducted with young school children in Canada and Uganda to discuss how teachers can support meaningful learning experiences in the classroom that can promote children's agency and social justice commitments.

Key words: critical literacy, child rights, Canada, Uganda, social justice, global education, participatory action research, multimodality, primary education, children's rights

Introduction

Given the increasing number and intensity of global crises (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, wars, economic upheaval and impacts of climate change), it is, more than ever, incumbent upon duty-bearers (parents, teachers and all adults who have responsibilities towards the well-being of children) to ensure children are able to engage in informed decision-making to work towards their collective future. Education should support children's intellectual and socioemotional growth and agency; however, as microcosms of broader society, educational domains—such as the school—can perpetuate dominant narratives and assumptions about what is deemed 'right' and/or 'normal', oftentimes founded upon, and steeped in, power imbalances, exclusionary practices, discrimination and injustice. A passive, unquestioning delivery and uptake of curricular content in which dominant cultural and ideological norms prevail risks education becoming '… instrumental in fostering and furthering ongoing political and ideological conflicts in various regions of the world … [and even] exasperate intolerance' (Bryan & Vavrus, 2005, p. 185). Thus, paradoxically, although considered to be integral to processes that support the eradication of injustices, education often perpetuates ideas and ideologies that undergird those injustices.

In this article, we discuss the intersection of critical literacy and children's rights education, drawing upon a multimodal, participatory action research (PAR) study involving young school children in Uganda and Canada. As researchers, we worked together with teachers to learn about how/if children understood rights and responsibilities as applicable to their lives in different contexts and what kinds of discussions of rights might emerge between children in these two different contexts through penpal correspondence. We begin with a discussion on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (the Charter) (https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-0014_-_african_charter_on_the_rights_and_welfare_of_the_child_e.pdf), followed by considerations of theoretical and pedagogical intersections between critical literacy and child rights, an overview of the study, and a discussion on findings and how they speak to the interconnectedness between critical literacy and child rights in the classroom.

The CRC and the Charter

The 54 Articles of the CRC represent a compendium of the basic requirements identified as necessary for children to be '… brought up in the spirit of the ideals

proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity' (Preamble, UN, 1989). In addition to the right to foundational elements necessary for well-being and social justice, the CRC declares that children have a right to voice and participation. Article 12 states that children have the right to form '… views [and] the right to express those views freely', and Article 13 grants '… the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice'.

However, a critical reading of the CRC reveals that it is laced with assumptions and biases that can exclude some children from participation and privilege some voices and geographies over others, for instance, males over females (Todres, 2016), able-bodied over disabled (Tisdall, 2012), adults over children (Tisdall et al., 2006) and the 'West' over the 'Rest' (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020). Reynaert and Roose (2017) suggest that children's rights are '… intimately bound to hegemonic, colonial modes of knowledge production, are at odds with other, non-European "grounded normativities" which might be driven by entirely different needs and questions' (p. 83).

Although this Eurocentric, colonial bias of the CRC has resulted in friction globally (Spence, 2021), it has also served to catalyse action towards the decolonisation of children's rights through the development of regional documents, such as the Charter, which share many foundational principles of the CRC but also emphasise cultural values espoused in different regions of the world (Mutua, 2016). The Charter provides an Africentric emphasis on contextual and cultural factors that were deemed lacking in the CRC such as the importance of community and collective rights, the impact of apartheid and the importance of the relationship between rights and responsibilities (Driscoll, 2022).

An overview of children's rights in Canada and Uganda

Both Uganda and Canada are signatories to the CRC. Although the UN classifies Canada as a high-income country and Uganda as a low-income country, indicating inherent discrepancies with respect to financial resources for, and availability and access to basic services and social welfare, children in both countries face barriers to full economic, cultural and social participation.

Canada has a mediocre record in addressing child poverty, child mental health, child obesity, educational standards and it also has low rates of child happiness and safety (UNICEF Canada, 2018, 2019, 2020). In 2018, Canada fared poorly across UNICEF's Sustainable Development Goals measurements: ending hunger (37 of 41); ending poverty (32 of 41); promoting child health and well-being (29 of 41); and having peace, justice and strong institutions (37 of 41) (UNICEF, 2018). In 2020, UNICEF (2020) ranked Canada 30th of 38 countries on child well-being outcomes and, in 2018, 22nd for pre-school enrolment, 24th in food security and child poverty, 27th for bullying and 29th for obesity. In 2019, UNICEF Canada found that 9% of children had families with insufficient income for basic needs, 20% lived in relative poverty, 28% of children reported experiencing bullying and 25% were exposed to violence at home, and health, well-being and poverty indicators are much worse for Indigenous children (Blackstock et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2017).

Uganda was an early ratifier to both the CRC (1990) and the Charter (1994) and brought their commitments into law with the Children Act (2000) despite concern that the CRC might bring 'a Western influence imported into the African culture' (paragraph 26). Ninety-six per cent of Ugandan children are considered to be 'vulnerable' (Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, 2011) and are susceptible to rights violations related to child labour (HIVOS et al., 2019; Humanium, 2019; UNGA, 2016); abuse, violence and neglect (Amin et al., 2013; Ochen et al., 2017; UNGA, 2016; Walakira et al., 2015); child trafficking (Avocats Sans Frontières, 2010; Walakira et al., 2015); and homelessness (UNGA, 2016). With Uganda having the third largest global refugee population and the largest in Africa (UNICEF, 2021), the Committee (2005) expressed concern about living conditions, education and health care for children in refugee camps. Further, many children and adults in Uganda are unaware of the CRC and the Charter (Driscoll, 2022; Ochen et al., 2017), and the Committee (2005) strongly recommended that children learn about their rights in school and that educators learn skills to teach children about their rights (Article 25).

Critical literacy and child rights education: theoretical and pedagogical considerations

Critical literacy and child rights education are interdependent and complementary; they both provide opportunities to share, to listen, to learn more about others, to develop awareness and appreciation of diverse perspectives and experiences and to reflect deeply on the world—especially through the lens of social justice (Biffi & Monta, 2021; Covell et al., 2017;

McDaniel, 2004; Vandenhole, 2020; Vasquez et al., 2019). Critical literacy encourages children to tussle with text (of all kinds) about important and complex issues such as diversity, equity, equality, justice, advocacy and voice, which are fundamental values espoused in the CRC and the Charter. Critical literacy involves the interrogation of claims that are presented as truth and fact to understand from whom/whence these narratives arise and their implications for/of power in myriad ways, degrees and contexts. Similarly, effective child rights education involves consideration of 'real-life' relevance of the extensive but aspirational goals enshrined in policies, documents and agreements such as the CRC and the Charter.

Opening space in the classroom to consider children's lived experiences may understandably trigger emotional distress, uncertainty and fear (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Leland et al., 2005), especially if children have direct experience with difficult situations (Chafel et al., 2007; Stribling, 2014). In fact, the World Health Organization (2023) suggests that 1 billion children between the ages of 2–17 have experienced violence in the preceding year. However, working towards social justice requires that injustices be exposed and examined, and arguably, this is particularly important for those children who either have already experienced harsh injustices in their own lives or have been exposed to them. The classroom can hold the potential to offer a safe space in which children and teachers can share their ideas, explore questions, be heard and respected and propose ideas for change and co-create authentic understandings of real child rights in situ (Chafel et al., 2007; McDaniel, 2004; Vasquez, 2014). Ideally, teachers will also encourage and nurture dialogue between children and their parents to support a shared empowerment journey that acknowledges, respects and celebrates the rights (and responsibilities) of all individuals.

Children, even in primary school classrooms, are capable of questioning, relating and expressing their ideas on challenging issues in their lives, families and communities and have the capacity to think critically and empathetically about difficult topics they encounter, including those that they may have witnessed or experienced first hand (Chafel et al., 2007; Howe & Covell, 2013; Tisdall et al., 2006; Vasquez, 2014). Effective age- and context-appropriate pedagogical approaches and resources are essential to guide the ways in which children process their learning within the world they find themselves within. Furthermore, the school environment (as well as other institutions and agencies) must be prepared to support children (as well as teachers) when they come forward with rights abuses. However, guidance, sensitivity and understanding of children's intellectual and emotional capacity are required to help them process discussions on children's rights, responsibilities and social justice (Howe & Covell, 2010). Thus, it is imperative that support systems for children beyond the classroom exist so that teachers are not saddled with untenable responsibilities for children who are being abused or are living in extremely vulnerable situations, or who are at risk of being so.

Education is '… a complex dialogical process of co-construction between adults and children [b]ecause content alone is not enough to create democratic, empowering classroom settings or to prepare students to become active agents of social justice in their lives and communities' (Biffi & Monta, 2021, p. 81). Thus, a classroom setting where children and their teachers are encouraged to bring, generate and acquire knowledge is conducive to '… begin[ning] from learners' worldviews, in effect turning them into inventors of the curriculum, critics and creators of knowledge' (Luke, 2012, p. 5). This learner-centred approach draws on constructivist, collaborative and inquiry-based pedagogy.

Ample evidence suggests that children are able to engage critically with concepts around social justice through child-centred, participatory, joyful, inclusive pedagogical approaches that respond to and are relevant to children's lived experiences and that appreciate and respect the sensitivity, appropriateness and guidance needed within different cultural (McDaniel, 2004; Taft, 2015), linguistic (Vasquez et al., 2019), political (James, 2007; Johnson, 2017) and social realities (Chafel et al., 2007; Martins et al., 2018; Tisdall et al., 2006; Yoon, 2020). Age- and context-appropriate materials and resources (e.g., materials in local languages featuring children, their families and community members engaged in familiar activities) and modalities (e.g., story telling, drawing, dance, songs and games) are also key to the effective facilitation of both critical literacy and child rights education in ways that are relevant in the classroom, on the playground, at home and in the community (Chafel et al., 2007; Kim & Hachey, 2021; Martins et al., 2018; McDaniel, 2004; Vasquez et al., 2019).

These materials and modalities can be used to facilitate children's and teachers' collaborative exploration of both simple and complex issues and generate important questions about synergies, compatibilities, affordances as well as incongruencies, discrepancies and/or injustices they may become cognizant of through inquiry and reflection (e.g., Why are males more prominent than females in roles of authority? Why are some groups of people treated differently? Why do some schools have more resources?). As Covell et al. (2017) reflect, this approach can help build children's capacity to shift from 'passive thinking to active questioning' (p. 303) while also building dialogic skills.

When children can consider their own positioning, roles, values, responsibilities, power and contributions within their families, schools, communities and even the larger world, they are then also able to reflect on how those same factors inform the lives of others (Ciardiello, 2004; Soares & Wood, 2010) and how their underlying assumptions may shape how they understand themselves and others (Silvers et al., 2010, p. 383). As Luke (2003) asserts:

> *"critical approach to literacy … is about engaging with texts and discourses as a means of bridging space and time, critically understanding and altering the connections between the local and the global, moving between cultures and communities, and developing transnational understandings and collaborations"* (p. 22).

A critical reading of the CRC and the Charter could lead to questions about why, for example, some children are not able to attend school if all children have the right to an education? The CRC and/or the Charter could serve as a reference point for questions pertaining to injustices that emerge from critical interrogate of text, for example, is it 'acceptable' that children are beaten? Neglected? Who is responsible for ensuring that they are taken care of properly? Critical literacy leads to the exposure of social injustices and the CRC and the Charter offer bodies of accountability to eradicate those injustices, leading to focus on questions such as: Why are those who are responsible for fulfilling rights and eradicating social justice failing in their duties?

These kinds of hard questions lead to scrutiny, or 'reading' of power structures and the roots of injustice and challenging commitments to justice. As Freire and Macedo (1987) famously stated, '… reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world' (p. 23). And 'reading the world' can promote children's agency and inspire taking action in the world. In fact, social action is often understood as intrinsic to critical literacy (Dunkerly-Bean et al., 2014; Leland et al., 1999; Soares & Wood, 2010), just as children's participation and agency are intrinsic to children's rights education (Nolas, 2011; Taylor & Percy-Smith, 2008). As such, children's action to promote social justice should be informed by their awareness (in age- and context-appropriate ways) of laws, policies and international commitments on rights such as the CRC, the Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which outline rights for all people but also intimate a social contract. UNESCO's Education 2030 (2015) asserts that exercising rights is critical to child rights education and that it should focus on how children '… learn how they can enact their rights in the here and now' (cited in Biffi & Monta, 2021, p. 81).

The CRC and the African Charter represent aspirational goals resulting from collective contemplation of these philosophical questions about how we collectively want to structure our societies and how we could meet our capabilities/responsibilities for all children. These frameworks offer children and teachers foundational lenses, through which to consider the rights, entitlements and responsibilities of all people. They also offer a platform for children to query and disentangle injustices that children may encounter. The CRC and the Charter can offer points of reference for both teachers and children in exploring both the definition and fulfilment of child rights for children in diverse contexts throughout the world.

In summary, a critical literacy orientation to learning about global children's rights prepares students with tools to democratically unpack and reassemble concepts of children's rights and how they are enacted and understood (Vandenhole et al., 2019), and child rights education should respect children's 'capacities and [involve] them as active participants in finding solutions to issues affecting them' (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017, p. 2). The right to challenge assumptions and power (as outlined in the CRC and the Charter), which also define critical literacy, should be recognised and fulfilled within education. Critical literacy, in turn, supports children to gain the tools and knowledge they need to question and challenge assumptions in the CRC and the Charter.

A brief description of the case study

Through our comparative, multimodal, PAR project, we explored the research question: What do primary school children in Canada and Uganda believe they need in order to thrive, to be cared for and to grow and develop? As a White female CIS-gender Canadian university professor specialising in research with children and children's rights, Kathleen had been working with the Child Thrive Program (CTP), an educational programme developed by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (described below), in Canadian schools for several years. Shelley, a White female CIS-gender Canadian university professor, who had been teaching and conducting educational research in East Africa (primarily Uganda) for almost 20 years (including 2 years of teaching in the Master of Arts in Education programme at the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), introduced the CTP to school children and teachers at a rural primary school in rural Southcentral Uganda. In Uganda, the Primary 1 (Grade 1) class included 34 children, along with the school headteacher and the classroom teacher. The CTP workshop in Canada took place in a Grade 2 class

in a suburban elementary school in a small city in Western Canada, with 22 participating children. In each school, we used the CTP to engage children in learning about their rights and responsibilities.

The headteacher in Uganda was eager to involve her school in the project. She expressed that the violation of children's (especially girls') rights was a pressing issue in her community, and she was keen to educate the children about the importance of their rights in contextually relevant and safe ways. The teacher in Canada had participated in workshops in previous years and was enthusiastic about opening a dialogue between the students in the two countries and to continue to implement child rights education. The children were concurrently learning about community advocacy and global citizenship. The teacher had brought in a rights-based approach in the beginning of the school year and the workshop and the connections to children in Uganda furthered the pedagogical strand in the class.

Since 2014, CTP has been providing workshops to kindergarten to Grade 5 classes in Canada, using interactive, hands-on opportunities to explore what child rights mean and how they impact and protect children. The key objectives of the CTP are to (a) develop cross-sectoral connections to advance challenging issues, such as bullying and child mental health; (b) share young people's perspectives on rights with key practitioners and decision-makers; and (c) cultivate positive relationships, behaviours and strategies among children, parents and practitioners.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearances were obtained from research ethics boards in both Canada and Uganda, and permission was acquired from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. Consent was obtained from the schools, the school board in Canada and the school district in Uganda, and the parents, as well as assent from the children. We shared the purpose of the workshop and the research with parents in local languages (Luganda in Uganda and English in Canada). Of interest, some Ugandan parents were initially sceptical about the children learning about their 'rights', based on their fear that learning about their rights may encourage their children to defy them. However, once the teachers responded to the parents' questions and concerns, the parents consented to their children's participation. We acknowledge the importance of parents' awareness and upholding of children's rights, as well as the need for sensitivity to ways in which rights may be perceived to conflict with responsibilities children may have when socio-economic circumstances require children's contribution to the family's well-being, for example, limited opportunities children have to play when they need to perform domestic chores (e.g., fetch water, tend to livestock and care for younger siblings) or even paid labour. (Although we did not have the capacity to do so in this small study, we believe that parents should be included in child rights education to mitigate their concern that it may be threatening to their roles, responsibilities and positionalities as parents. It is important to learn from communities and families about the roles and responsibilities of, as well as the opportunities for, children in diverse contexts to support contextually relevant child rights education. Additionally, there is an opportunity to work with family members to share information about children's rights and responsibilities and how this can support parenting. Our current research project includes this element.)

Methodology, methods and data analysis

Using a multimodal, PAR methodology, we conducted research *with*, as opposed to *on*, the children. PAR prioritises the expertise of those living an experience (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR is also an established methodological approach with children (Clark, 2011) and well aligned with Article 12 of the CRC, which focuses on the importance of ensuring children can express their views on things that impact them. We relied on participants' knowledge, experience and expertise of their contexts to identify existing resources, strengths, conditions and prioritised local needs (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2012).

We used a multimodal approach to engage the children in sharing their knowledge and ideas. Multimodality (Kress, 2011; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) encourages expression and communication through multiple semiotic (meaning-making) modes, such as gestures, images, sounds and other such material representations that constitute 'organized sets of semiotic resources for meaning-making' (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). The individuals' experiences and understandings of the world are acted upon and expressed through practices that engage with resources/modes to create signs, which are then taken up and interpreted by those who interact with the sign (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Jewitt, 2008). We used context- and age-appropriate activities, concepts, questions and topics that invited children to engage in creative interrogation of children's rights and focused on their thoughts and questions in an attempt to provide children with the opportunity to reclaim spaces they are in (including schools, homes and playgrounds) that are often occupied by adults (Biddle, 2017), thus democratising communicative exchanges in ways that

included and valued the contributions of children (Jones & Walker, 2011).

We captured data through observation, research notes, analysis of children's artefacts (e.g., postcards and artwork) and discussions with children and teachers. We used a triangulation design analysis approach (Cresswell, 2008) and engaged in iterative rounds of data analysis. We first analysed the children's rights that the participants communicated in discussions and images and broadly compared them while minding the different contextual factors (e.g., environment, geography, population, welfare structures and access to resources). We then analysed the meaning children made of children's rights within discussions about their artefacts and their ideas.

Workshops and activities

Researchers worked with teachers in both classrooms to co-facilitate the workshops. In both sites, facilitators used a hand puppet—'Giggles' in Canada and 'Nunu' in Uganda—to introduce the workshops. Most, if not all, of the children in Uganda had never seen a puppet before and were delighted to have Nunu lead the session. Most of the children in the Canadian classroom had met Giggles in a previous year and welcomed them back enthusiastically. In both classes, facilitators introduced Nunu/Giggles as visiting from Planet Zog, 'Nunu/Giggles doesn't know much about children yet but wants to learn. They have visited children in Canada/Uganda and now want to learn about children in Uganda/Canada. Can you help teach them about children's rights?'

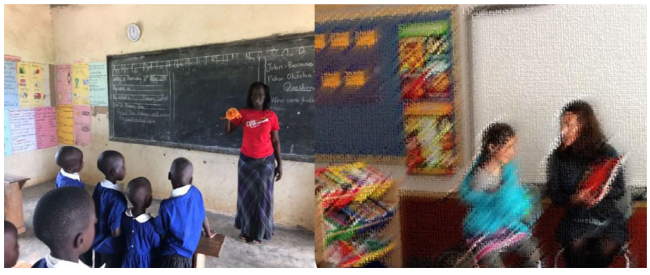


Photo 1 (left) Caption: Teacher introduces Nunu the puppet to children in Uganda.
Photo 2 (right): Researcher engages child and Giggles the puppet in discussion about children's rights.

The sessions began with the facilitators sharing that rights are those things that children need to survive and thrive and what every human being deserves, no matter who they are or where they live, so that we can live in a world that is fair and just. The facilitators shared that children's rights are enshrined in an international agreement, the CRC. The children were asked what they believed children needed to grow, be safe, be healthy, be happy and have rights. Their responses were recorded on the boards by the facilitators and listed in Table 1. Table 1 illustrates the similarities between the two groups of children. The differences between the two groups are also worth noting. The Ugandan children provided more diverse and detailed answers, speaking to both those elements needed for physical health and well-being but also to broader concepts of a good life within the context of their family and community. The Canadian children also noted the physical and psychological elements needed for a good life, which interestingly were more closely aligned with the way the CRC lays out rights across health, education and safety. This may be a result of their introduction to the CRC in previous years. The Canadian children also added the importance of clean air.

In both classes, the discussion of rights led to the idea of 'responsibilities'. The children discussed their various responsibilities. The children in both countries demonstrated their understanding of the relationship between rights and responsibilities, discussing how if they had the right to be treated well and taken care of properly, they also needed to treat others well and help others (such as their parents) fulfil their responsibilities. Examples of their responsibilities included sharing; being nice to one another; studying hard; cleaning the house or their room; helping their parents, family, friends and teachers; wanting the best for others; valuing the love of your family; doing chores; feeding animals; digging in the farm; looking after younger children; respecting others; and protecting others. When asked who was responsible for upholding their rights as children, the students in Uganda emphasised their parents and teachers. In Canada, the students listed mothers, fathers, siblings, other family, teachers, police officers, mayors, fire fighters, doctors, nurses and each other.

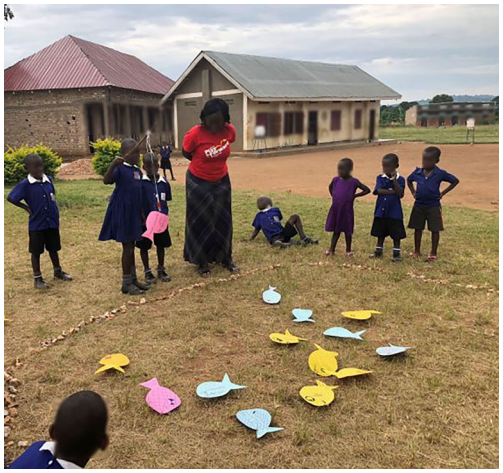
Next, facilitators introduced the book *I Have the Right to be A Child* by Alain Serres (author) and Aurelia Fronty (illustrator) (2012). In Canada, the book was read in its original English. Willis (2015) acknowledged the right for children to be able to fully access reading material linguistically and through representations of familiar contexts and activities. In Uganda, the research facilitator read the book in English, but the headteacher read from a translated version of the book she wrote in the local language, Luganda, which included corresponding contextually descriptive images depicting familiar people and situations for the Ugandan children. In both classes, the puppets were used to chat about and ask children their ideas about rights to help ground the relevance of the rights as they were presented through the text.

Table 1: What children need to thrive.

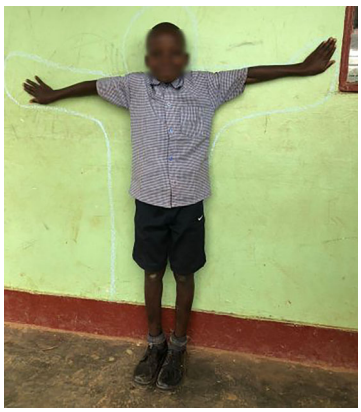
Uganda	*Canada*
• Good sleep and rest, • be listened to, • be handled properly, • good health (access to medication/vaccinations), • clothing, • good food, • good life, • good family, • be able to go to school (to have school fees paid by parents), • good home, • be beautiful, • be happy, • be loved by parents, • safety and security, • not be beaten, • be free from poverty, • move freely and • be/feel free.	• A room or a house (or shelter), • a family who loves them, • be safe, • be able to write (and be listened to), • school, • healthy food, • water and • clean air.

The class was divided into three groups, each of which engaged in one of the following participative activities for approximately 20 min and then they rotated stations to cover all three:

1. 'fishing for rights and responsibilities', where the children used a fishing rod (a stick with string and a magnet at the end) to catch a fish (a paper fish with a right or responsibility written on it and a paper clip attached for magnetic attraction) and identify if the word on the fish represented a right or a responsibility (based on Equitas, 2008).



2. identifying what children believe they need to thrive by drawing outlines of their bodies on the outside school walls (in Uganda) or on large sheets of paper (in Canada) and drawing or writing words that depicted their needs and their wants. Discerning between the two helped them to explore the meaning of rights.



3. writing postcards to their political leaders, either President Museveni or Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, expressing their hope that a specific

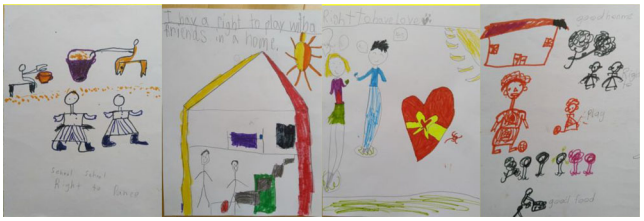
right (chosen by each child) be respected (based on Equitas, 2008).

In Canada, in closing, everyone stood in a circle holding hands and working together to move the hula hoop around the group without breaking the circle. This activity focuses on cooperation, interconnectivity and working together. The facilitators asked the children what they noticed, and they replied that everyone had to work together.

In Uganda, the students wrote letters to children in Canada that included drawings using the following template:

> Dear Friend in CanadaThis is me [activity in drawing].Please tell me about you.Sincerely,[name]

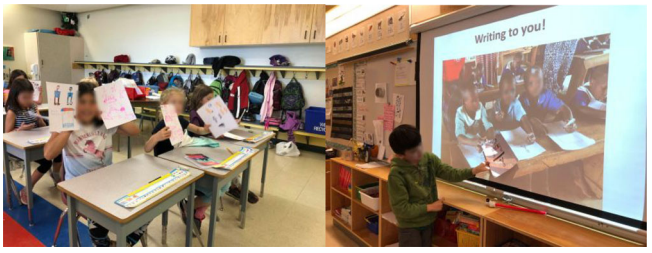
Examples of pictures from the Ugandan children are below:



Caption: Postcards from children in Uganda (left and right) and Canada (middle).

Additional sessions were provided for students to focus specifically on the connections between Canadian and Ugandan students and to continue to discuss children's rights.

In Canada, the research facilitator who had worked with the children in Uganda shared a photo presentation about the country and the community where the school is located. Then she distributed the letters from the children in Uganda to the Canadian children.



Caption: Children in Canadian classroom receiving postcards from children in Uganda.

The children were provided some time to develop their response letters, as sampled below.

The children played a game entitled Rights Freeze. They were asked to think of a right that was important to them, for instance, the right to shelter. The game started with music and dancing, but when the music stopped, the children had to freeze in the action of that right, for instance, a house (for shelter). We played this game three times and each time debriefed the rights demonstrated. The session closed with another circle where we had to cooperate to move the hula hoop around the circle.

In their letters to each other, the children discussed and drew pictures about specific rights or areas for rights that they felt were particularly important. Each reference to a right, usually one per picture, was counted, as quantified. Across the pictures they drew and the letters they wrote to one another, the children in both countries outlined a range of rights. The Ugandan children, in order of occurrence, named home, food, school (or education), travel (e.g., bus), friends and family. The Canadian children named more, in order of occurrence friends, home, family, food, clean water, art (expression), education (school), love, clothes, clean air and environment. The children in Uganda later asked the students in Canada additional and more critical questions, communicated via email, including:

1. Are children normally taught in school or home how to be open or straight when it comes to their rights?
2. Are jobs and responsibilities chosen for the kids and depending on gender?
3. How about home chores, are they done according to gender?
4. How about when children's rights are violated, how are kids helped and what happens to the culprit?

The children in Canada responded that they learned about their rights in school and at home but learned more details about rights at school and inferred about rights at home through, for example, healthy food, clean water, shelter, safety and access to education

and medical care. With respect to the second and third questions, children in Canada responded that they did not feel there was a distinction in the jobs, responsibilities or opportunities based on gender, at home or in school.

The last question was more challenging. One student suggested that if someone breached their rights, 'they would get in trouble'. They also noted that the most important thing to do was to 'tell someone' such as a teacher, a parent or grandparent. The children appeared to struggle with how to interpret this question and paused. The teacher asked them to think through an example of a situation where one student was not treating another one with respect, thus steering them in the direction of considering 'violation' as bullying or school-based conflict. The teacher later shared she was uncomfortable delving into a discussion of child abuse and thus guided the discussion towards bullying. The headteacher in Uganda later confirmed that this question was about more serious and even life-threatening children's rights breaches. She noted: '… kids here suffer violence ranging from beating, starving, failure to be taken to school, early/forced marriage, child labour etc. Some of these kids are victims of domestic violence by drunken parents, prostitutes etc. So, some are small cases others are criminal.'

The children in Canada asked questions that were more focused on the environmental or activity-based differences between the two communities, such as: How long does it take to travel there?; Do you write your last name first?; What are the rules of football? Are they different than soccer? Why is the name different?; Do you play baseball?; How are your houses built?; What age or grade does your school go to?; What grade do you want to go to?; When do you start working?; Do you have a TV and do you watch TV?; Do you have power (i.e., electricity)?; How many kids are in your class?; How do you get around, for instance, to school (e.g., by bicycle)?; and Do you have cactus? A final question was: What kind of gift can we send you (i.e., something you do not have)? These questions reflect the day-to-day realities of the children and hint at a deep sense of curiosity about how children in other contexts live, learn and play. The Canadian children also wanted to make the relationship more tangible by asking what they could collectively give to the children in Uganda (discussed in more detail later).

Discussion

Our study showed that children were receptive to, and capable of, critically exploring the concepts of rights and responsibilities when these were presented in ways that were relevant to their contexts and reflected their lived realities, cultures and languages and fostered their creativity and expression through multiple modes (images, play, text and spoken word). Discussions on rights started simply but became progressively more complex through child-led inquiry which also supported opportunities to build deeper reflection on rights (Manion & Jones, 2020).

The CTP workshops opened space for the children to probe more deeply into ideas that interest them, and thus, they were able to 'co-create' the curriculum (Luke, 2012). For example, during the class discussion (in both contexts) when the children were identifying rights, they also began considering related responsibilities, and the idea of the relationship between rights and responsibilities was pursued and acknowledged (by the facilitators) through child-led inquiry.

The children also demonstrated the ability to critically assess their contexts and identify the availability of resources and infrastructure that support them. For example, when asked who was responsible for upholding their rights as children, the students in Uganda emphasised their parents and teachers. In Canada, in addition to parents and teachers, the students listed siblings, other family, teachers, police officers, mayors, fire fighters, doctors, nurses and each other. Although the children did not engage in any comparative contemplation about the kinds, number or availability of resources and supports, their responses seem to indicate that the children in Canada felt they had a broader circle of protection than did the children in Uganda. It is quite possible that further cross-national engagement and critical reflection by the children could expose the discrepancies between these resources, leading to big questions around global inequalities.

The questions posed by the children also demonstrate their ability to critically 'read' their worlds. For example, the question posed by the Ugandan children about what happens to 'culprits' who 'violate' children reveals their awareness of child abuse in their context but also a curiosity about whether it was the same in another setting. The Canadian children's difficulty in responding to the question suggests either that they were unaware of violence against children or that they were not comfortable discussing it. The Canadian teacher facilitator's inclination to frame the question in the context of a conflict between children at school and their later comment about discomfort with the topic of the abuse of children by adults may indicate ways examination of difficult topics, or critical literacy, may be thwarted in (as well as outside of) the classroom in the Canadian context.

The question posed by the Canadian children to the Ugandan children—What kind of gift can we send you?—demonstrates the children's burgeoning awareness of economic imbalances at a global level through

critical reflection of the lives of the Ugandan children presented in their letters. The Canadian children seemed to perceive they had 'more' and were interested in lessening the imbalance. Some Canadian started a Lemonade and Cookies sale to fundraise, which enabled the headteacher in Uganda to purchase art supplies. However, the facilitators were cognizant that being 'charitable' often obscures the need for critical examination of the causes of inequalities and so were intentional about framing the gift as a 'redistribution' of resources. The researchers and the teacher emphasised the importance of the interchange to support the ability for the children to mutually learn from one another living in different parts of the world and in different contexts. The idea appeared to resonate for both sets of children.

These sessions were relatively brief (between 1 and 3 h), but more integrated focus on child rights education with a critical literacy lens could wield more in-depth critical reflection and knowledge co-creation within and across the two different contexts, leading to a greater understanding of rights that children deem important in their lives.

Conclusion

Social justice is at the heart of both critical literacy and children's rights. We have not yet achieved a world with full human rights and dignity (Clark et al., 2020), and the children of today face many social, economic and environmental challenges. This paper has argued that a critical literacy approach to child rights education can support children's understanding and pursuit of social justice and that a critical literacy approach to learning can be supported by knowledge and understanding of children's rights. Child rights education alone is insufficient, as Spence (2021) decries, 'there are problems with an unthinking, decontextualized promulgation of global children's rights norms' (p. 144). Fostering a critical exploration of contextually understood rights may support them to 'read' their world better and instigate their desire to co-create effective social justice approaches for social change: 'When schools are thought of as offering training in the workings of democracy, … [it] can afford children the opportunity to learn how to use their voices, how to constructively enact their rights to the benefit of the entire community' (Biffi & Monta, 2021, p. 80).

This case study provided insight into the inner worlds of children and their ideas and analysis of children's rights. The outcomes of this project piqued our curiosity as researchers to consider what more could be done to centre children's voices on children's rights and co-create learning communities with teachers and children in Uganda and Canada that build upon the intersection between critical literacy and child rights education in the pursuit of social justice. In deepening our curiosity about the role comparative critical literacy could play in working with children across cultures, we shifted our research questions to more fully explore the differences and similarities between children's ideas in different contexts and how these impact both their understanding of and their ability to realise children's rights. Our current, expanded programme in Canada and Uganda includes a team of Ugandan and Canadian researchers and educators who will work closely with teachers and children to co-create contextually and age-appropriate pedagogical tools and approaches to deepen child rights education; we will also work with parents and community members to generate greater awareness of child rights and to engage in dialogue about what children's rights might look like and how they can be achieved in ways that contribute to the strengthening and well-being of diverse communities throughout the globe. Both Canada and Uganda have much to do to bring children's rights into reality in meaningful ways for all children, particularly those most marginalised in both contexts. To address the rights records of both countries, we believe contextually and linguistically tailored child rights education offers one avenue of redress.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors of this article declare there is no conflict of interest in publishing this article.

References

AMIN, S., AUSTRINA, K., CHAU, M., GLAZER, K. and GREEN, E. (2013) The adolescent girls vulnerability index: guiding strategic investment in Uganda. Poverty, Gender and Youth.

AVOCATS SANS FRONTIÈRES (2010) Baseline survey report: child trafficking in Soroti, Katakwi and Kampala Districts Uganda.

BEEMAN-CADWALLADER, N., QUIGLEY, C. and YAZZIE-MINTZ, T. (2012) Enacting decolonized methodologies: the doing of research in educational communities. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18.1, pp. 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411426414

BIDDLE, S. K. (2017) Social constructions of childhood: from not-yet-adults to people in their own right. *Anthós*, 8.1, p. 3.

BIFFI, E. and MONTA, C. C. (2021) 'Children's education: from a right to a capability', in J. GILLETT- SWAN, N. THELANDER (Eds.) *Children's Rights from International Educational Perspectives Wicked Problems for Children's Education Rights*. Springer.

BLACKSTOCK, C., BAMBLETT, M. and BLACK, C. (2020) Indigenous ontology, international law and the application of the Convention to the over-representation of Indigenous children in out of home care in Canada and Australia. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110, 104587. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104587

BRYAN, A. and VAVRUS, F. (2005) The promise and peril of education: the teaching of in/tolerance in an era of globalisation. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 3.2, pp. 183–202.

CHAFEL, J. A., FLINT, A. S., HAMMEL, J. and POMEROY, K. H. (2007) Young children, social issues, and critical literacy stories of teachers and researchers. *YC Young Children*, 62.1, p. 73.

CIARDIELLO, A. V. (2004) Democracy's young heroes: an instructional model of critical literacy practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 58.2, pp. 138–147. https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.58.2.2

CLARK, A. (2011) Breaking methodological boundaries? Exploring visual, participatory methods with adults and young children. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19.3, pp. 321–330.

CLARK, H., COLL-SECK, A. M., BANERJEE, A., PETERSON, S., DALGLISH, S. L., AMERATUNGA, S., BALABANOVA, D., BHAN, M. K., BHUTTA, Z. A., BORRAZZO, J., CLAESON, M., DOHERTY, T., EL-JARDALI, F., GEORGE, A. S., GICHAGA, A., GRAM, L., HIPGRAVE, D. B., KWAMIE, A., MENG, Q., MERCER, R., NARAIN, S., NSUNGWA-SABIITI, J., OLUMIDE, A. O., OSRIN, D., POWELL-JACKSON, T., RASANATHAN, K., RASUL, I., REID, P., REQUEJO, J., ROHDE, S. S., ROLLINS, N., ROMEDENNE, M., SINGH SACHDEV, H., SALEH, R., SHAWAR, Y. R., SHIFFMAN, J., SIMON, J., SLY, P. D., STENBERG, K., TOMLINSON, M., VED, R. R. and COSTELLO, A. (2020) A future for the world's children? A WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission. *The Lancet Commissions*, 395.10224, pp. 605–658.

COPE, B. and KALANTZIS, M. (2000) *Multiliteracies: New Literacies, New Learning*. Routledge.

COVELL, K., HOWE, R. B. and MCGILLIVARY, A. (2017) 'Implementing children's education rights in schools', in M. D. RUCK, M. PETERSON-BADALI, M. FREEMAN (Eds.) *Handbook of Children's Rights: Global Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Routledge.

CRESSWELL, J. W. (2008) *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn. Pearson.

DRISCOLL, J. (2022) A long, long journey: adopting a children's rights-based approach to child protection programming in rural communities in Uganda. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 30.4, pp. 895–921. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-30040002

DUNKERLY-BEAN, J., BEAN, T. and ALNAJJAR, K. (2014) Seeking asylum: adolescents explore the crossroads of human rights education and cosmopolitan critical literacy. *Teaching & Learning Faculty Publications*. 46. https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning_fac_pubs/46

EQUITAS INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION (2008) *Play It Fair, Human Rights Education Toolkit for Children*. Equitas.

FAULKNER, E. A. and NYAMUTATA, C. (2020) The decolonisation of children's rights and the colonial contours of the convention on the rights of the child. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 28.1, pp. 66–88. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02801009

FREIRE, P. and MACEDO, D. (1987) *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. Bergin & Garvey.

HEFFERNAN, L. and LEWISON, M. (2000) Making real-world issues our business: critical literacy in a third-grade classroom. *Primary voices K-6*, 9.2, pp. 15–22.

HIVOS, CEFORD and NASCENT (2019) *End Term Evaluation Getting Down to Business Programme*. Uganda: Stop Child Labour Coalition.

HOWE, R. and COVELL, K. (2010) Miseducating children about their rights. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 5.2, pp. 91–102.

HOWE, R. B. and COVELL, K. (2013) *Education in the Best Interests of the Child: A Children's Rights Perspective on Closing the Achievement Gap*. University of Toronto Press.

HUMANIUM (2019) Children of Uganda: realizing children's rights in Uganda. https://www.humanium.org/en/uganda/

JAMES, A. (2007) Giving voice to children's voices: practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist*, 109.2, pp. 261–272.

JEWITT, C. (2008) Multimodality and literacy in school classrooms. *Review of Research in Education*, 32, pp. 241–267.

JOHNSON, V. (2017) Moving beyond voice in children and young people's participation. *Action Research*, 15.1, pp. 104–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750317698025

JONES, P. and WALKER, G. (Eds.) (2011) *Children's Rights in Practice*. Sage.

KIM, S. J. and HACHEY, A. C. (2021) Engaging preschoolers with critical literacy through counter-storytelling: a qualitative case study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49.4, pp. 633–646.

KRESS, G. (2011) 'Partnerships in research': multimodality and ethnography. *Qualitative Research*, 11.3, pp. 239–260.

KRESS, G. and JEWITT, C. (2003) 'Introduction', in C. JEWITT, G. KRESS (Eds.) *Multimodal Literacy*. Peter Lang.

KRESS, G. and VAN LEEUWEN, T. (2001) *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. Arnold.

LELAND, C., HARSTE, J., OCIEPKA, A., LEWISON, M. and VASQUEZ, V. (1999) Exploring critical literacy: you can hear a pin drop. *Language Arts*, 77.1, pp. 70–77.

LELAND, C., HARSTE, J. and SMITH, K. (2005) Out of the box: critical literacy in a first-grade classroom. *Language Arts*, 82, p. 4.

LUKE, A. (2003) Literacy education for a new ethics of global community. *Language Arts*, 81.1, pp. 20–22.

LUKE, A. (2012) Critical literacy: foundational notes. *Theory Into Practice*, 51.1, pp. 4–11.

MANION, K. and JONES, S. (2020) Child rights education: building capabilities and empowerment through social constructivism. *Canadian Journal of Child Rights*, 7.1, pp. 1–34. https://doi.org/10.22215/cjcr.v7i1.2615

MARTINS, P. C., OLIVEIRA, V. H. and TENDAIS, I. (2018) Research with children and young people on sensitive topics—the case of poverty and delinquency. *Childhood*, 25.4, pp. 458–472.

MCDANIEL, C. (2004) Critical literacy: a questioning stance and the possibility for change. *The Reading Teacher*, 57.5, pp. 472–481.

MGLSD (2011) Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.

MUTUA, M. (2016) *Human Rights Standards: Hegemony, Law, and Politics*. State University of New York Press.

NOLAS, S.-M. (2011) Reflections on the enactment of children's participation rights through research: between transactional and relational spaces. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33.7, pp. 1196–1202. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.02.014

OCHEN, E., SSENGNEDO, J. and CHEMONGES, E. (2017) 'Do child rights legislation and policies effectively protect children from maltreatment? Reflection from a nationwide sectoral in-depth analysis', in D. KAAWA-MAFIGIRI, E. WALAKIRA (Eds.) *Child Abuse and Neglect in Uganda*. Springer International Publishing.

REASON, P. and BRADBURY, H. (2006) *Handbook of Action Research*. Sage.

REYNAERT, D. and ROOSE, R. (2017) 'Children's rights and social exclusion: a framework to eliminate social exclusion? Critical discussions and tensions', in M. RUCK, M. PETERON-BADALI, M. A. FREEMAN (Eds.) *Handbook of Children's Rights: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Routledge.

RUIZ-CASARES, M., COLLINS, T., TISDALL, K. and GROVER, S. (2017) Children's rights to participation and protection in international development and humanitarian interventions: nurturing a dialogue. *International Journal of Human Rights*, 21.1, pp. 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2016.1262520

SERRES, A. (AUTHOR), FRONTY, A. (ILLUSTRATOR) (2012) *I Have the Right to Be a Child*. Groundwood Books.

SILVERS, P., SHOREY, M. C. and CRAFTON, L. K. (2010) Critical literacy in a primary multiliteracies classroom: the Hurricane Group. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 10, pp. 379–409.

SOARES, L. B. and WOOD, K. (2010) A critical literacy perspective for teaching and learning social studies. *The Reading Teacher*, 63.6, pp. 486–494 http://www.jstor.org/stable/25615838

SPENCE, N. (2021) International development organisations and the localisation of human rights. *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 27.1, pp. 139–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X20211916875

STRIBLING, S. M. (2014) Creating a critical literacy milieu in a kindergarten classroom. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, 10.1, pp. 45–64. http://jolle.coe.uga.edu

TAFT, J. K. (2015) "Adults talk too much": intergenerational dialogue and power in the Peruvian movement of working children. *Childhood*, 22.4, pp. 460–473. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568214555148

TAYLOR, M. and PERCY-SMITH, B. (2008) Children's participation: learning from and for community development. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 16.3, pp. 379–394. https://doi.org/10.1163/157181808x311213

TISDALL, E. K. M. (2012) The challenge and challenging of childhood studies? Learning from disability studies and research with disabled children. *Children & Society*, 26.3, pp. 181–191. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2012.00431.x

TISDALL, K., DAVIS, J., HILL, M. and PROUT, A. (2006) *Participation for What: Children Young People and Social Inclusion*. Policy Press.

TODRES, J. (2016) 'Children's rights and women's rights: interrelated and interdependent', in M. D. RUCK, M. PETERSON-BADALI, M. FREEMAN (Eds.) *Handbook of Children's Rights: Global Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Routledge.

UN COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (2005) *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: concluding observations, Uganda*, CRC/C/UGA/CO/2. https://www.refworld.org/docid/45377eb70.html [accessed 10 January 2023]

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY (GA) (2016) Compilation of UN Information: Universal Periodic Review Uganda.

UNICEF (2017) *State of the World's Children 2017*. Innocenti.

UNICEF (2021) *Protocol to Increase Safe and Meaningful Participation of Young People, Focusing on Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being*. UNICEF.

UNICEF CANADA (2018) *UNICEF Report Card 15: Canadian Companion, the Equalizer: How Education Creates Fairness for Children in Canada*. UNICEF Canada.

UNICEF CANADA (2019) *UNICEF Report Card 16: Worlds Apart·Family-friendly Policies in Rich Countries*. UNICEF Canada.

UNICEF CANADA (2020) *The Future Is Now: The Environment and Children's Well-being in Canada*. UNICEF Canada.

UNITED NATIONS (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf

VANDENHOLE, W. (2020) 'Decolonising children's rights: of vernacularisation and interdisciplinarity', in R. BUDDE, U. MARKOWSKA-MANISTA (Eds.) *Childhood and Children's Rights Between Research and Activism*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS 10.1007/978-3-658-29180-8_12.

VANDENHOLE, W., TURKELLI, G. E. and LEMRECHTS, S. (2019) *Legal Commentary on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Its Protocols*. ISBN: 9781786433121.

VASQUEZ, V. M. (2014) *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children: 10th Anniversary Edition*, 2nd edn. Routledge 10.4324/9781315848624.

VASQUEZ, V. M., JANKS, H. and COMBER, B. (2019) Critical literacy as a way of being and doing. *Language Arts*, 96.5, pp. 300–311.

WALAKIRA, E., DDUMBA-NYANZI, I., BUKENYA, B., BAALE, E. and BYAMUGISHA, J. (2015) *Evaluating the Effects of a Community-based Violence Prevention Intervention by War Child Holland in Post Conflict Northern Uganda*. Makerere University and War Child Holland.

WILLIS, A. I. (2015) Literacy and race: access, equity, and freedom. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 64.1, pp. 23–55.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (2023) Violence against children. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children

YOON, H. S. (2020) Critically literate citizenship: moments and movements in second grade. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52.3, pp. 293–315. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X20939557

CONTACT THE AUTHORS
Shelley Jones, PhD, Professor, College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Royal Roads University, Victoria, Canada.
e-mail: shelley.12jones@royalroads.ca

Kathleen Manion, School of Humanitarian Studies, Royal Roads University, Victoria, Canada.
e-mail: kathleen.manion@royalroads.ca